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Painting as in a journey

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M.F.A. Thesis

by

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**B.A. Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana, 1988**

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Painting
as in a journey

“There comes a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood leads to fortune, omitted and all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat and we must take the current where it serves, or lose our ventures.”

These words were taken from one of the few letters I received from my father some years ago. It was written with the concern that I take my opportunities seriously. Of the legacy I received from my parents, this letter with the quoted passage is one of my most cherished belongings. As I prepare to write about my paintings and graduate school, these words seem the most appropriate to begin my thesis. Today I see the importance of taking one's opportunities as they arise because, like life itself, these “ventures” are transient and fleeting.

I came to attend graduate school long after I first read those words of wisdom. Quite a few years have gone by, but the essence of that advice is as true today as it was then. I have always thought of life as a continuum of learning, growth and change. One of my earliest desires was to be an artist: I think at age five it was from the joy of drawing; at age twelve it had turned into a viable talent; at age eighteen, a headstrong stubbornness; at age twenty-one, a struggle; at twenty-seven a decisive life challenge.

I came to graduate school to be in an environment that would enable me to concentrate on my paintings and venture into a stream of challenge and growth. I believed that this opportunity would enrich my life with an experience that could not be diminished. I would be encouraged by peers and teachers to explore the

creative process which would enable me to produce more developed paintings than I had before. By taking the time to research my own art work, I would secure the foundations of my life's work with a solid understanding of that which motivates me artistically.

In the years between graduate and undergraduate school I had developed a figurative style and paint application that was promising, but needed the focused attention provided in a graduate painting program. Armed with my life experiences and artistic perseverance, I was ready to put myself into a situation where I would be challenged and inspired. For these reasons, I began my graduate studies in Florence, Italy. Italy, and Florence in particular, was a visual inspiration for me. Everywhere I looked, breathed, and walked was filled with history and art. Many artists have visited there to attain deeper knowledge and inspiration.

As for myself, I got to develop a deeper knowledge and inspiration on many fronts. I was able to study the language, develop my teaching and communication skills and, most importantly, concentrate on painting. I was absorbing not only intellectual stimulation but a variety of experiences.

That following summer I came back to the States enriched from my stay abroad. It had given me a dynamic understanding of the history of Western European art and tradition. I had seen first-hand Giotto's, Fra Angelico's, Michelangelo's, da Vinci's and Botticelli's. These artists and their accomplishments shaped the very essence of how we view the aesthetics of art. It was an experience that was indelibly etched into my psyche and one that surfaces often in my life.

In Florence I began investigating my own painting and its history and influences. Of the work I did there, there were two paintings in particular, Red Dress and Yellow Tutu, that initiated the direction I would pursue in my studies. These paintings were approximately sixty-three inches by forty-eight inches: large, life-size women figures in active poses. The woman in Yellow Tutu was in a frontal position, kicking over a table. In Red Dress the figure was seated facing the viewer, legs spread apart in a defiant stance, one arm raised and holding a flower that had been severed from its stem. The other hand held the knife.

With these paintings I began to examine the works of Max Beckmann. I responded to his use of color, form, line and narrative. The figure in Red Dress held a pose which is often seen in Beckmann's work. Two paintings of his, Violet and Red and the triptych Blindman's Bluff, are examples of this form. Though this woman is not an exact copy, she was inspired by the power of his work. These paintings were made to reflect my own courage and perseverance, but they also reflected these traits in women, in general. They confronted the viewer; they were aggressive, bold and determined. These images were formed with the idea of demonstrating anger, strength and fortitude through visual narrative. I was not attempting to ROCK the world through some feminist manifesto. I simply wanted to paint. These images of the female were painted because that is what I know best, what I can translate: a state of being which is true to me. I am a woman. I am an artist. I am a human. In essence, my motivation to be an artist is grounded in my desire to be able to give validity to my existence. I paint, therefore I am. It reflects

my value system, what I consider important and relevant to life, and it reflects my own assessment of what I am best able to do. It is vital to who I am as a person.

My identification with painters is something that came from seeing paintings. They moved me like music, like literature. It was something I wanted to do. And I wanted to do it as well or better than those works I admired. I could literally make an endless list of paintings and works of art I love because there is so much richness in the tradition; however, for the sake of clarity and direct connection with my own work, I will briefly name a handful: Edvard Munch, Vullard, Bonnard, Susan Valadon, Soutine, and Matisse. Moving on to more recent painters, some artists who have influenced me are the aforementioned Max Beckmann, Joan Brown, DeKooning, Diebenkorn and Alice Neel.

All these artists are figurative painters with a spontaneous and intuitive feel to their work. I respond to different qualities in each artist. In Bonnard, Matisse and Diebenkorn I relate to their themes of interior/exterior environments and their use of color. With Beckmann, it is his theatrical presentation of the figure and his use of the black “painterly” drawing lines. I respond to the surface and gestural energy of DeKooning’s paintings. Alice Neel is influential for her direct approach to the figure and her use of outlines to define forms. I respond to these artists’ work in a way that shapes how I resolve my paintings. Consciously and unconsciously I use these artists as guides for my own paintings.

The work I did in Florence was pivotal to the direction I continued at Virginia Commonwealth University. I felt that some of the developments and

changes, such as scale and image, were fertile ground for more exploration. I decided to continue to paint the figure in a large scale and explore more of what it had to offer.

In Richmond, I painted seated women in an interior environment. After several paintings, and the subsequent critiques, it came to my attention that perhaps by using a live model for the figure I might benefit from having solid forms from which to paint. The shift I made from painting figures from my imagination to using a model was an important change. I now made painting decisions based on real form. My paintings became less narrative-inspired image and more of one that emphasized the formal issues of line, drawing and color.

The first of these series was a blue painting called Quagmire, followed by an orange painting called Dead Bird, and then a red painting called Jill. These pieces were made as I investigated the use of the model. The images consisted of a centrally located woman sitting in a landscape/interior environment. While my paintings from Florence had standing figures, aggressively posed, these women seated next to a table expressed a dense and inward emotion. These paintings were about moments of reflection and quiet anticipation.

The quiet pose of the figure was juxtaposed to the energetic drawing activity through which the figure was defined. The lines of paint invited the viewer to go through the painting and take part in its present state, while also observing its evolution. The process of painting involved building the surface with layers of color, lines and cancellations, while simultaneously making editing decisions.

For example, the blue painting Quagmire went through various stages and colors before I decided on the final composition and color. I simplified the image to a female figure seated at a table, editing out the background to a two-tone blue theme. What I had left was a much more interesting and sophisticated painting. While the figure was quiet in attitude, the general aura of the piece was much more disquieting. The firmness of the table was undermined by the undulation and murkiness from which it emerged.

That search for figure and form through drawing was a process I continued with my other pieces. On an influential level this piece reflects several sources. The emphasis on the singular figure with strong lines to define it is reflective of Alice Neel's figures, while the claw-footed table refers back to Matisse's interiors and tables.

In the process of investigating the figure, I also wanted to look into the different properties of color. In Dead Bird, the orange color of the painting was a clear change from blue. While still using the process of sketchy, drippy, painty underglazes and lines, I explored the results of painting a canvas with an overall color in mind. The building up of the surface through successive layers of paint and cancellations was influenced in many ways by the surface of DeKooning's paintings, echoing the raw, seductive quality of paint. I used all my collective painting knowledge to produce a piece that was interesting on a technical level in addition to being intriguing to look at. After the initial sensation of seeing the color and life-sized figure, one could, after close examination, find cryptic images: the dead bird,

the table still-life with a knife or half-eaten fruit.

While the orange and blue paintings were constructed out of a layering process, the next painting, Jill, was painting in a glaze of reds, the vibrant color echoing the immediacy of its creation. The painting was made in a much more direct manner than the previous pieces. In this painting, the interior/exterior is reduced to one or two layers of red glaze while the figure is the focus of most of the painting activity. She is painted with several layers of paint and glazes. The delineation of her form through a painterly line, again, is suggestive of Alice Neel's outlined forms.

The growth in my paintings from the earlier work in Florence to the more evolved pieces I made in Richmond was intriguing and exciting. I found a place I could go with these original angry women images that demonstrated change. I felt I had investigated my process thoroughly enough with these paintings to move on to a less defined approach.

The next group of figure paintings reflected the confidence I had achieved from my studies overall. And through that confidence I had attained a sense of freedom just to paint and let all the new information be itself in the most intuitive way; I also had to keep in mind this information's continuing relationship with what I had painted so far. The next paintings, Lying Buddha, Time Out, and Before and After the Storm, were included in my thesis show. While they related to the work as a whole, they were painted independent of one another. I employed various methods in developing each piece. For one of them I used a model, while

the others were painted without one. With several paintings in progress in all different sizes, I painted my women again.

For Lying Buddha, a large horizontal canvas with a reclining nude, I used a model who had angular features. While I painted from her, it brought to mind different references, from Picasso's primitive mask paintings to various Venus themes, including one painted by William Johnson; the composition of this painting was particularly influenced by Johnson's painting called Nude. Lying Buddha was of the same large dimensions as the seated figures and though lying down, it still related to the group as a whole in technique, feeling and content.

The next two paintings, Time Out and Before and After the Storm, were painted from my imagination with other artists in mind, including Braque, Joan Brown, and Bonnard. Time Out, for example, was inspired by one of Braque's figurative paintings. I used the composition of this piece in an attempt to use Braque as a resource in developing the composition and image and worked to push it to another level. The painting with bands of pink, brown and mauve colors demonstrated Braque's influences, while the seated figure continued the theme of contemplation and repose.

The last painting in my show, Before and After the Storm, was a stark contrast in size to all the other paintings and became a visual punctuation to the group. It was a miniature diptych, eleven inches by twenty-two inches. Unlike the previous paintings, this composition did not contain a woman. Instead, each panel had an image of a table and chair in a landscape. In the background of both panels

hovered twin tornados, the difference between the two images being that the tornados had passed through in one and were approaching in the other. The flowers are intact on top of the table in the first panel, while in the other the vase has disappeared, replaced by a cat staring at the table. Though this painting didn't contain a human figure, it suggested the figure through the forms of the table and chair.

This piece echoes the work of Bonnard and Joan Brown, I believe, for two reasons. First, in the way a patterning develops in the painting from image elements, such as the patterning of the checkered table top and flower petals. Second, both Joan Brown and Bonnard have used animals in their paintings as quirky counterpoints in their composition; in Before and After the Storm the cat is a quirky counterpoint to the table and tornado images.

The thesis show reflected several years of perseverance and focused attention. I hung paintings from several different periods of my studies, choosing those that best communicated my progress. The discoveries I found from my experience in graduate school cannot be negated. They exist and, consciously or not, will be one of my life's more important endeavors. I attained my earlier goals of using this opportunity to grow artistically and intellectually, and gained a fluidity and confidence that was reflected in my work. It was an experience that had both tangible and intangible results, and in that sense it was priceless. I followed a rich tradition of human investigation of art and culture. This "venture" gave me the tools to continue to develop as an artist, and I look forward to the future and the

paintings it will bring. My journey is yet unfolding, and despite, or perhaps because of everything that has happened on that journey, it is a full and wondrous sea.























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I. EDUCATION

- 1995 Master of Fine Arts; Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, Virginia
- 1988 Bachelor of Arts; Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

II. ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

- 1992 Spring, Adjunct Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University;
Richmond, Virginia
Taught a three-credit Basic Drawing class and a one-credit Basic
Drawing and Painting class
- 1991 Fall, Adjunct Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University;
Richmond, Virginia
Taught a three-credit Basic Drawing class
- 1989-1990 Assistant to Professor, Studio Art Center International; Florence,
Italy
Assisted in an undergraduate painting class

III. GRANTS, AWARDS AND HONORS

- 1991-1992 Painting Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, Virginia
- 1990 Foreign Studies Scholarship, Studio Art Centers International,
Florence, Italy

IV. EXHIBITIONS

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 Pine Street Barber Shop & Gallery; Richmond, Virginia

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1993 M.F.A. Thesis Show, Anderson Gallery; Richmond, Virginia
- 1992 Virginia Commonwealth University Student Art Space;
Richmond, Virginia (two person show)
- 1992 Union Station Art Exhibition; Washington, D.C.
- 1991 "Choice," A.I.R. Gallery; Soho, New York
- 1991 "6 + 2," Interact Gallery, Nicholson & Greene; Richmond,
Virginia
- 1991 "The Independent Group," Art Space, Virginia Commonwealth
University; Richmond, Virginia
- 1991 "Continuum," James Center; Richmond, Virginia
- 1990 Galleria di Palazzo Pinucci; Florence, Italy
- 1989 Studio Art Centers International; Florence, Italy
- 1987 South End Open Studios; Boston, Massachusetts
- 1985 South End Open Studios; Boston, Massachusetts
- 1980 McCalla Gallery, Indiana University; Bloomington, Indiana

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1991 "Continuum," Art Review, Richmond Times-Dispatch; Oct. 17th